JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Women's Participation in the Individual Satyagraha Movement in Tamil Nadu: With Special Reference to the North Arcot District

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Abstract : The Women's participation in the Indian national movement has opened a main front in the context of the Nationalist studies, yet many regional experiences remain insufficiently documented. The Individual Satyagraha Movement of 1940-41, initiated under Gandhian leadership, witnessed notable involvement from various districts of the Madras Presidency, including North Arcot. This paper is an attempt to explore the role played by women in the district and analyse the forms of political engagement they adopted during the movement. Through applying historical research methods, the study relies on archival documents and government records to trace local participation. This study reassesses that women were not merely bystanders but active participants who organised protests, propagated nationalist ideals, and questioned colonial authority, and also faced imprisonment and severe charges. This study highlights the significance of women's participation in sculpting the political structure during the later phase of India's independence movement.

IndexTerms **- Individual Satyagraha, women's participation in politics, North Arcot district, Vellore Jail, Hunger strike, women freedom fighters, civil disobedience movement.**

Introduction

In the History of the Freedom Movement in India, the Revolution of 1942 always holds a higher pedestal as the milestone in achieving India's independence from foreign rule. The North Arcot District of Tamil Nadu in Madras Presidency with the longest history of standing against the British Administration from as early as 1806, by the Vellore Mutiny did not slack behind during the Individual Satyagraha Movement where it gave an active participation in the Indian Freedom Struggle. The women from being considered as the second citizens to being the victims of social evils to transforming themselves into brave freedom fighters, the North Arcot district has seen it all during this nationalist phase.

Commencement of the movement

In 3rd September 1939, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, declared war on Germany without the Indian leaders, particularly the Congress. This declaration was condemned by the Congress, which decided not to participate in the war and agitated against the government. In response to Britain's need for support, Lord Linlithgow made the "August Offer" on August 8, 1940, conceding the right for Indians to draft their constitution and promising Dominion Status after the war. However, it fell short of expectations, especially regarding the War Advisory Council, and Gandhi was unwilling to support the war without a firm British commitment to India's independence.

As the British rejected his demands, Gandhi launched the Individual Satyagraha, a limited resistance movement. He met with the Viceroy on September 27th, 1940, but the Viceroy remained unyielding. Gandhi's movement focused on asserting the right to speak against the war. Satyagrahis, selected carefully, would give anti-war speeches based on Gandhi's script.1 Gandhiji did not even press for the immediate transfer of power at the Centre. He was prepared to wait Until the end of the war provided the Government relieved India from the War and granted Indians the freedom to speak against the war. But the Viceroy rejected these demands.2 The objective of the satyagraha was restricted to demanding the right to preach against the war. Vinoba Bhave opened the campaign on October 17, 1940, he started his march by making anti-war speeches in the village of Paunar and was arrested and sentenced to three months imprisonment.3 Followed by him, Jawaharlal Nehru was the second satyagrahi, he was arrested on 31st October 19404 and sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment. Among the high crowd that took part, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani, Satyawati and Aruna Asaf Ali were on the main front.5

This unjustly harsh punishment pushed Gandhiji to extend the scope of civil disobedience to include members of the Working Committee, the AICC, and the Central and Provincial legislatures. After the arrest of Maulana Azad in January 1941, it was

further extended to all the representative Congressmen, from the members of the village Committees to those of the Provincial ones, who were expected to court imprisonment.[6]

Individual Satyagraha Movement in Tamil Nadu

There were meetings and demonstrations in every district in the Presidency of Madras protesting against the conviction of the National Leaders. The Individual Satyagraha was organised and offered in Madras City and 9 other districts with a full flow of support from volunteers. Prosecutions under the Defence of India Act were launched in Madras City and the districts of Coimbatore, Madura, North Arcot, Ramnad, Salem, South Arcot, Tanjore, Tinnevelly and Trichinopoly. Congress Committees were set up even in the mofussil, anti-war speeches were read, pamphlets were distributed and posters were displayed all regarding anti-war intentions, the Tamil Provincial Congress Committees transformed itself into Satyagraha Councils and enrolled volunteers, which resulted in the large section of prosecution alongside this, the Government imposed press censorship on the publication of news relating to the Satyagraha.[7]

Among the most prominent Congress leaders in the Presidency who were arrested and sent to jail for offering Individual Satyagraha, were C. Rajagopalachari, S. Satyamurti, T.S.S. Rajan,[8] C.N. Muthuranga Muaaliar, T.S. Avinashilingam Chetty and P.S. Kumaraswami Raja. B. Sambamurti, Rukmani Lakshmipati (Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Assembly), K. Venkataswamy Naidu, M. Bhaktavatsalam, N.S. Varadachari, M. Bapineedu, Ahmad Thambi Mohideen Maricar, Kaleswara Rao, K.R. Karanth, P.S. Murti and A.B. Shetty.[9] All the Ministers "jumped from their Secretariat to the Prison House'', yet the Individual Satyagraha Movement in the Presidency continued unabated into 1941. The sentences awarded to the satyagrahis were severe, the fines heavy. And they were not uniform. In the initial phase of the satyagraha itself, there were glaring contrasts between the sentences awarded to Vinobha Bhave and Jawaharlal Nehru. Later, however, the sentences were less harsh, and the duration did not exceed 2 to 4 months. The number of satyagrahis arrested in Tamil Nadu as issued by the AICC office at Sevagram is about 424, and of these 33 are placed in 'A' Class, 88 in 'B' class, 176 in 'C' class, 88 in remand and 42 not arrested and on the way to Delhi as of February 1941, and fines imposed on the Satyagrahis were summed up to Rupees 29030.[10]

As the Movement gained momentum, more and more people came forward to offer satyagraha and court imprisonment. As a result, "the Government was eventually compelled to ignore all but the leaders and to arrest only those who were influential. Gandhiji instructed the non-arrested satyagrahis to perform pada yatra (To march on foot) to Delhi, carrying on anti-war propaganda on the way. Then, the slogan Chalo Dilli (go to Delhi) was raised. Later, however, finding that the people in the Madras Presidency were hard put to it, Gandhiji commissioned them to carry on house-to-house, man-to-man propaganda in the villages".[11]

Participation of Women in Individual Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu:

In Madras the Tamil and Andra provincial committees transformed themselves into Satyagraha councils and enrolled volunteers, all this anti-war propaganda led to a very large number of arrests and imprisonment for different terms. The women leaders were arrested in Tamil Nadu too one among them was Rukmani Lakshmipati,[12] the Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Assembly. She was detained under Sec-38 of the Defence of India Rules (DIR), on the morning of 21st of November 1940 at her residence in Harris Road, Madras and sentenced to one-year simple imprisonment. 'Let the women in India follow the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and maintain the honour and dignity of our motherland' declared Mrs Rukmini Lakshmipathy as she was about to be arrested. She wrote letters to the Mayor and Aldermen to the governor appealing to them individually not to participate in the war effort.[13] U.M. Janaki Ammal wife of Aravamutha Iyengar from Uthiramerer, Chingleput district. She was a member of the District Board of Chingleput District, who took part in the tenacious movement in 1941 and was arrested and sentenced/ kept in the state jail for women, Vellore for 11 months.[14] Lakshmi, Wife of G.S. Lakshmanan showed avid nature in the movement by reading anti-war speeches prepared by Gandhiji and was Prosecuted and made to pay a fine of Rs. 1,000/- and the following the fulfilment of paying the fine she was left un-imprisoned,[15] Other notable women satyagrahis from this district, who were courted for imprisonment under the Sec-(38) DIR during the individual satyagraha campaigns were; Kaliammal, K.S., A.K. Panjali, Pankajathamal, Savithri Ammal from Udumalapet Taluk, Sundarambal, from Veerapandi Taluk, and V.C.P. Thayammal, from Vellakkinar Post, Coimbatore District, took part in the movement.[16]

From the Madras District Devaki Ammal daughter of Ponnuswami Naicker volunteered in the Individual Satyagraha movement, and was imprisoned for 15 days in 1941 under Sec-38 (5) of DIR- Kept in the Central Jail, Madras. Jayalakshmi, A.C. wife of A.K. Chandra Sekara Mudaliar took part in the Individual Satyagraha 1941, was arrested and sentenced to 3 months under Sec-38 (5) of DIR, Kept in State Jail for Women.[17] Other women satyagrahis from the district who were arrested under DIR for participating in the Individual movement are Neelavathiammal, Lakshmi Bharathi, Rajam Bharathi R.J Rukmani Ammal N.S, Saraswathi Pandurangam, Thayarammal wife of Kamaraja Pillai, and Thirupurasundari.[18] In Madurai Akilandathammal wife of Vaidanatha Iyer took part in the Individual Satyagraha movement and was sentenced to 3 months in 1941 and kept in Vellore Jail for Women.[19] Lakshmi, Peria Akka, Rangammal, and Sornammal the daughter of Rangachari, took part and were jailed for the same cause.[20] Ramanathapuram District woman; Chellamal, wife of Ponniah Chettiar, joined the movement in 1940 and took part in the individual satyagraha movement's campaigns which caused her imprisonment for 3 weeks in central jail, Madras. Manickam Ammal from Tiruvekampet, and Visalakshi P.N.S., literate women, were arrested for participation in Individual Satyagraha, 1941 and were sentenced to Rs. 500/- fine and 9 months in jail in State jail for women, Vellore. Narayanammal, daughter of Guruswami Naicker from Alamarathupatti, Joined and took part in the Individual satyagraha in 1941, was arrested under Sec-38(5) of DIR and was sentenced to three months of imprisonment, and was kept in State jail for Women, Vellore.[21] From Salem District, Lakshmi Venkataram wife was arrested for one month and was kept in State Jail for Women, Vellore for volunteering. From the South Arcot District were Anjalai Ammal wife of R. Muruga Padayachi, Aranganayaki Ammal from Tindivanam, Patanjali V.K, who Joined and took part in the Movement in 1941, courted imprisonment twice and kept in

Mayuram and Thanjavur jails for 6 months, and D. Lakshmi Ammal, daughter of Veeraswami Iyer, and Muthulakshmi Ammal,[22] also went under the same ordeal.

From Tirunelveli district, Thayarammal, wife of Arumuga Nainar from Azhavartirunagari region, took part in the Individual Satyagraha, in 1941 and she was kept in Tiruchendur, Tuticorin and Nanguneri Jails for one month and 12 days. From Tiruchirapalli, Radhabai Subramanayan, M.L.A. (Central), Zamindarini of Kumaramangalam, offered Satyagraha in her zamin village by distributing anti-war Pamphlets and was arrested by the Trichengode police on 9th of December 1940.[23] , Other women Freedom fighters in the district are Piyari Biwi wife of Nanna Sahib of Karur, Pappamal G., from Karur, Kamalam, wife of M.K.M. Muthu, Rajamani Ammal alias Rajamani, wife of M.S. Rajan, Vijayalakshmi Ammal P.N.S., wife of P.M. Chokailingam took part in the Individual satyagraha in 1941.[24]

Individual Satyagraha Movement in North Arcot District:

The National United Congress Association were made to prepare the volunteers and freedom fighters for the course of the movement which mainly prepared the members for the anti-war agitation,[25] likely in the North Arcot District the Satyagraha camp was created for the first time in Tamil Nadu.[26]

This camp was conducted for 42 days with 48 volunteers, and 12 volunteers were from North Arcot District. One was V.M. Obaidullah Sahib of Vellore, he was nominated by K. Kamaraj to be the president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and to be in charge of the Individual satyagrahas. Under the charge of V.M. Obaidullah, many Congressmen from North Arcot District indulged in Individual Satyagraha, and the participation of women was prominent in them, it is important to note the actions of the Government against the Political agitators,[27] where the participation of men in the movement and their imprisonment was a generic concept, the women participants who joined the movement up to the minute were also forced to face the same state of imprisonment. Though there was the option of paying a fine, the amount of Rs.1000/- was not a cup of tea to many, causing crowds of women to suffer the fate of imprisonment alongside men.

Hunger Strike in Vellore State Jail

Vellore, in the North Arcot District, has its roots long spread when it comes to agitating against foreign rule over its natives, this land once again became a paragon during the Individual Satyagraha movement, where the prisoners of the Individual Satyagraha movement went on a Hunger strike against 'the treatment of Prisoners in jail' due to the class system as well as for levying imprisonment before taking trail.[28] Regarding this "On 9th April of 1941, 79 detenus went on hunger strike in Vellore Jail for the four days. The government condemned their action as the Spokesman of the Government spoke darkly of evidence putting the detenus outside of the pale of citizens' right for trial before punishment, but the public in general knew, nothing about it, nor had the government. In the case of the detenus, the authority of magistrates is expressly removed, and the police are kept in command of the situation.[29]

The hunger strike in the Vellore Jail was entirely due to avoidable causes. The strike had started as a protest against an innovation which stands self-condemned on account of the very resentment roused against it. The imperative reason of the state necessitating the Budden division into two separate categories, of prisoners who previously had been classed together with no visible detriment to any seared interest entitled to be respected. Nor it was an extravagant demand that in return for detaining citizens without trial Government should as a minimum concession, make some suitable provision for the dependents of the detenus. The entire basis of detention without trial was the wartime emergency. The Hunger strike was drawn back with the final say from the Prisoner's view, stating that, the Government should set aside false considerations of prestige, and meet the demands of the detenus, with prompt redress, before the situation develops into one of sore hunt between rules and ruled. In crisp, their demands were: (1) Classification of Security Prisoners be abolished with immediate effect. (2) A personal Allowance of Rs, 10/- a month be given to each in addition to goods and clothing allowance and (3) that a suitable family allowance be granted to all.[30] The political prisoners were treated badly, their food was bad, and they were lathi-charged inside the prison. After the cases of hunger strikes when the satyagrahis were treated as ordinary criminals, as a result, the enthusiasm of the satyagrahis had waned completely by the time they were released. Out of the 2093 Individual Satyagrahis, who were imprisoned in the Vellore Jail, only 59 courted arrests for a second time.[31]

Women's Participation in the North Arcot District.

When it comes to the women's participation from the North Arcot District in the Individual Satyagraha Movement, it can be taken as a case of serious milestone regarding their increase in participation in the tenacious nationalist movements, crowds of women were prosecuted for their participation in the Individual Satyagraha Movement and among them, the option of "Paying fine and no case" was a common scenario.

Among this crowd, some of the women who were courted imprisonment were, one 'Lakshmikanth Ammal', the daughter of Rathinasabapathi Chetti of Thiruvudal, Thiruvannamalai Taluk, who was arrested under section DIR in 1941 for participating in the Individual Satyagraha Movement of 1941 by preaching the Anti- War Speech Prepared by Gandhiji was courted imprisonment for two months in the Vellore Jail for Women.[32]

Sakuntala Gurjali', an ardent satyagrahi of Tiruvannamalai took part in the Anti-war Satyagraha (Individual Satyagraha) of 1941 and was arrested and sentenced to 4 months under DIR and kept in the Presidency jail for Women, Vellore.[33]

'Parvathi' of Tiruvannamalai participated in the Individual Satyagraha Movement and was imprisoned for 6 months under section 38 (5) of the DIR, and kept in Vellore Jail. On May 15th 1941, she was released from the Vellore Prison. She said that there was nothing much to complain about the treatment of women satyagrahi prisoners from this particular jail, except that the water supply was quite inadequate and that jail authorities should pulverise water from the municipality.[34]

Lakshmi, wife of S. Srinivasa Rao, a Member of AICC, offered a Satyagraha at Arni Bazaar on the morning of 9.12.1940 by shouting anti-war slogans. She was arrested and sentenced to 9 months under Defence Rules of India and fined Rs.200.[35] Mrs Rajamani of Vellore, of the 'C' class political prisoner who was released from jail after serving her imprisonment was arrested at the jail gates and was kept as detenus in the Vellore detenus block.[36]

Mrs Kannappa Mudaliar, a member of, the Provincial Congress committee offered satyagraha on April 21st of March 1941, thus was arrested and produced before the Sub-Collector, and was sentenced to 6 months R.I. and a fine of Rs,1,000.[37]

Mrs. Radha Bai Subbaroyan M.L.A wife of Dr. P. Subbaroyan was released on the 21st of May 1941, at 10 a.m. from the presidency Jail for waiver, Vellore she said that "the treatment gives to 'C' class Prisoners left much to be desired".[38]

Satyagraha was offered by many leaders as well as women appointed by local bodies, among them several were arrested and some were allowed to continue their marches to Delhi,[39] Regarding this Gandhiji had instructed about 'fine and food', "Men or Women, no propertied persons may join the movement who are not prepared to pay the fines.[40] There is, however, no objection to the transfer of property to relatives, provided the transfer is a Bonafide' transaction"[41]

Conclusion

The Individual Satyagraha saw many women leading the front to face British Rule for India's Independence By May 1941 the Individual Satyagraha Movement began to lose its momentum, following this, in the Bardoli Session, by the resolution on 30th December 1941, the working committee terminated the Individual Satyagrahas campaign. Thus, the lawless movement that lasted for over a year witnessed various aspects through which women expressed their hunger for freedom, proving that women stand second to none when provoked and kindred. The bravery of women, despite facing the harsh societal rays of being abused, molested or even raped at the hands of the police, did not shudder. Many women chose to take up leadership and were on point to follow the Leading voices enabling a great leap towards the nearing freedom from the Alien rule.

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[12] *Notes:* The First Women Satyagrahi in Madras Presidency.
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[20] Who's Who of Freedom Fighters, *op. cit.*, Vol I, pp. 466-528.
[21]*Who's Who of Freedom Fighters (Tamil Nadu),* Volume II, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras, 1973, pp. 107-182.
[22] Who's Who of Freedom Fighters, *op. cit.*, Vol II, pp. 360-398.
[23] HFM Bundle No. 103, Anti War Movement- Individual Satyagraha, p. 243.
[24] *Who's Who of Freedom Fighters (Tamil Nadu),* Volume III, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras, 1973 pp. 18-52.
[25] *Notes:* The term 'Freedom Fighters' which is used in this stage refers to the natives, volunteers and participants; the people who fought for the cause of Indian Independence, who during their contemporary, were termed as Political Agitators by the Government.
[26] FNR, 2nd half of June 1942, Government of Madras, TNA, pp. 63-74.
[27] Notes: Here the term 'Political Agitators' denotes the Freedom Fighters in the eyes of the Government.
[28] *Notes:* Discrimination among the treatment of prisoners in classes A, B and C.
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